

The Leather Scene as Liberation

MCC MEMBERS WHO attended the "Affirmation '76" rally in Lafayette Park at the 1976 General Conference may have noticed the presence of a number of leather/levi club members in the security detail that afternoon. Responding to a request for assistance from General Conference planners, a number of the men from the Washington, D.C., area cycle clubs acted as marshalls under the supervision of U.S. Park Service police. Their visibility underscored the presence in the gay community of the leather/levi clubs, their bars and other social institutions and their role within the leadership of the gay community.

When Police Chief Ed Davis of Los Angeles attacked a fundraising benefit "slave auction" for the Gay Community Services Center sponsored by the leather/levi segment of the community last spring, he attempted to paint them as modern-day Simon Legrees. His efforts backfired when Los Angeles gays rallied to their support and began a public information campaign which turned the local media coverage of the battle 180 degrees around.

Who then are the leathermen, and how do they fit into the gay subculture? If, as is sometimes asserted, they are hostile to religion and gay liberation, how is it that some of them in fact serve in key positions within MCC congregations and other gay community organizations?

To begin with, as organizations within the gay movement have blossomed

during the past seven years, new visible constituencies have emerged. As increasing numbers of gay and bisexual persons have involved themselves in the movement, more specialized organizations have been created. Thus the organizational children of the Gay Liberation Fronts and Gay Activist Alliances of 1969-70 include the Gay Academic Union, the various gay political clubs, most of them affiliated with the Democratic Party, the Lesbianism and Sexuality task forces of the National Organization for Women, the several mainline Protestant gay caucuses, Dignity and MCC, not to mention the many commercial establishments and businesses now visibly gay-owned and operated.

During this period of organizational evolution, there has been a parallel of the leather/levi community. Today there are between 50 and 75 gay motorcycle clubs in North America with 30-50 members each. Dallas has two, Boston four, the Baltimore-Washington area 11, and there are 15-20 in the New York metropolitan area. It is estimated that the five clubs in Los Angeles involve 150-175 people in varying degrees. The October 1975 issue of *Scene & Machine*, a national leather/levi monthly formerly published in Washington, D.C., listed 20 "runs" for the three-month period October-December 1975. These weekend-long "runs" took place in cities like Montreal, Los Angeles, Houston, St. Louis, Washington and New York, each drawing 100-200 people for weekends of

socializing rather like the gay equivalent of Shriners or Elks conventions.

Performing some of the functions of a family, a college fraternity, and the Kiwanis Club, these leather/levi groups are in most ways distinct and separate entities from the gay movement, yet they are virtually 100% gay and include, as we have indicated, persons who carry leadership roles in the gay movement. The national "Nestea" dances which benefit the national Gay Task Force and the Gay Rights National Lobby began at the Eagle bar in New York, asx for L/L activities in the Northeast U.S.

In an effort to gain wider understanding in the gay community of the L/L (leather/levi) people, The Gay Christian presents the following essay, "The Leather Scene as Liberation" by Rick Weatherly, followed by a dialogue involving some aspects of the L/L scene. The writers are: Rick Weatherly, 23, an exhorter in MCC Washington, D.C., and a student at George Washington University, involved in the gay liberation movement since 1971 and the leather scene since 1973; and Roy Birchard, 23, a UFMCC minister and formerly church relations staff person of the UFMCC field office in Washington, D.C., formerly managing editor of *Scene and Machine*, a defunct national leather monthly. Founding editor of TGC, he is currently organizing a new MCC congregation in Norfolk, VA.

"GAY?" SAID THE bike club member, hitching up his levis, "I'm homosexual, but I'll be damned if I'm a faggot."

Oppressive language to be sure, but it is one end result of a mutual rejection and isolation that has bred contempt among homosexual males and has divided people who should have been allies. Furthermore, to some MCCers who frequent leather bars or belong to gay motorcycle clubs, it presumes an unbridgeable separation between the burgeoning leather community and the gay rights movement that really isn't there. In light of the success of military gay liberation figures like Dennie Beller and Leonard Mtlovich in gaining the support of leather enthusiasts, and taking into account the large number of MCC ministers and laity who flocked to Washington, D.C.'s Eagle bar in full leather/levi attire during the '76 General Conference, it may be time to take a close look at what is loosely referred to as the "levi/leather/western/bike club" crowd and its place both within MCC and in the general gay community.

In dealing with such an emotionally-charged topic, it would be best to be as clear as possible as to what is under discussion and what is not. To begin with, this article is *not* an attempt to deal with that set of little-understood sexual behaviors known as sadomasochism (S&M). While the leather scene is related (and unrelated) to S&M, it is not the focus of this examination. Rather, the focus is on that part of the gay male community which esteems the traditional concepts of masculine dress and behavior, and in trying to see whether this "scene" contributes to liberation or not.

It would also be helpful to define my use of the word, "liberation." In the report of the Task Force on Men to the Seventh Annual General Conference, the following passage appears:

Human liberation does not stem from individual or social needs alone, but that these needs are part of the same process. We feel that all liberation movements are equally important; there is no hierarchy of oppression. *Every group must speak its own language, assume its own form, take its own action;* and when each of these groups learns to express itself in harmony with the rest, this will create a basis for all-embracing social change. (Emphasis added.)

What, however, is the "leather scene"?

The leather scene is the most visible part of a growing number of gay men who have rejected effeminate behavior as a norm for themselves and who seek to return (or if they have not left, then to maintain) a traditionally-masculine manner of dress and behavior. By that, I would include a deep voice with a lisp, a firm, heavy walk (as opposed to mincing), the wearing of levis, rather than double-knit slacks, and, for embellishment, chains rather than makeup and glitter. In short: "leather" rather than "lace." (The use of the term "traditionally masculine" is deliberate and reflects the realization of how subjective masculine dress and behavior can be, both from culture to culture and person to person. Such manifestations of dress and behavior are not "innately" masculine [if there is such a thing], but rather within our culture in the U.S., these are generally considered the signs of masculinity.)

The question that immediately arises concerning this movement back to traditional masculine standards is of course, Why, in this day of women's liberation, men's liberation, and gay liberation, is there such a growing interest among some gay men in manners of behavior and dress that belong to the dominant (i.e., straight male) culture?

Some have charged that is a reaction, a going-against, liberation, that these men are fleeing freedom, having found it impossible to cope with, and are seeking safety in "tried and true" standards. Some have suggested that beyond a fleeing of liberation, the leather scene constitutes an anti-liberation clique in which racist, Fascist, and sexist males can perpetuate their hatred of others in community with like-minded men.

While such explanations might account for some part of the leather scene, as a comprehensive explanation this "reaction" concept fails. To insist that the explanation lies in "reaction" is simplistic at best and at worst betrays an essential bias against the scene. If the scene is essentially anti-liberation, why are some of the leading figures in gay liberation part of the leather scene? And why (and this is the most important question) do so many men who enter the leather scene find that their entry provides them with a degree of

liberation they had not experienced elsewhere? To continue to insist that the scene attracts only pseudo-Nazis or freedom-fleeing pathetics is to refuse to deal with that liberation some men claim the scene provides.

But, if the leather scene does provide liberation, it must be asked, "liberated from what?"

When a man "comes out" into the general gay bar scene and the institutions of the gay community and begins to associate with other gay men, an acculturation process begins. Since effeminate behavior and dress is the standard, new entrants usually adopt in a gradual process the behavior and dress of those with whom they wish to identify. The process is usually subtle and sufficiently gradual that most men are unaware of their growing effeminacy, and indeed, many obviously effeminate men react with surprise and hostility when referred to as such.

This process is no different from that experienced by anyone moving from one culture to another. Move to another country or region of your country and you'll soon be talking and acting like the people around you. But why is a similar change from masculine to the effeminate perceived as oppressive, or at least as less-than-desirable? And why is it being rejected by a growing number of gay men?

The answer seems to lie in the "power bestowing" ability of gay liberation itself. Subject to arrest for private sexual activity in most states, discriminated against and abused in all sections of this culture, and held in fear and contempt by the dominant culture, gay people—like women and blacks—perceive themselves as powerless. Like many oppressed groups, some of its members have internalized the oppression and even feel *unworthy* of power. To identify with the gay community has often been to identify with powerlessness. This sense of powerlessness is often expressed by effeminacy.

Masculine behavior and dress are symbols of a "powerful" person. Women were quick to notice the fact, and early feminists frequently adopted masculine dress and behavior to express their rejection of the powerless status given them by the dominant culture. Effeminacy, insofar as it symbolizes weakness, is a reflection of powerlessness.

All liberation movements are "empowerment" movements. They give

the weak power, the self-despising self respect, the oppressed freedom. In a time of liberation and empowerment, an increasing number of gay men are beginning to question the unexamined, often automatic and involuntary adoption of behavior and dress that seems to reflect powerlessness rather than liberation.

The leather scene reflects this rejection of powerlessness. Its members adopt manners of speech and dress (often to what may seem an exaggerated degree) that they identify as masculine, as powerful. Thus we have leather bars full of men dressed up like police, hardhats, soldiers, 1950s-style motorcycle gangs, etc., all symbols of powerful people.

Nor, it should be added is such dress always pretense. Many in the leather scene are actually engaged in these professions. Since I've been at the Washington Eagle, I've met carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers, ranchers, hardhats, cops, Marines, senior military NCOs and officers, motorcycle riders, telephone installers, and in my three-to-four-year habitation of fluff bars, I *never* met any of these (except for Marines and military officers; they're *everywhere*.) They are by no means a majority of the Eagle crowd, but they are there in substantial numbers, and they are not in the fluff bars.

To many of these men, masculinity is not just desirable but emphatically necessary to their self respect. And they see the leather scene as their only possible contact with the gay community. Many of them claim that until their community got its first leather bar, that for years they never went to *any* gay establishment. These men perceived that the end result of such associations would be loss of their masculinity, and they rejected it at the cost of being any part of the gay community. This rejection, and the resultant years of isolation, has produced among many of the "old hands" in the leather scene a great hostility to the wider gay community and frequently a refusal to acknowledge being part of it—the sort of attitude represented by the club member quoted earlier.

But as frequently as one encounters such hostility, one encounters similar vicious and unloving remarks directed against the leather scene by those involved in the effeminate gay male scene. Granting the "seeming strangeness" of the symbols chosen by the leather scene to express its sense of

power, it must be remembered that any liberation group "... must speak its own language, assume its own form, take its own action."

This applies no less to the leather scene and its nascent sense of community than it does to gay people in general. The liberation that is in Christ Jesus (and this liberation is at work as much, if not more, out of the Church as within) is for every person from every sort of oppression, and it is for each person and group of persons to decide whether they are oppressed and to take such actions as *they* see fit to end that oppression and to erase it from their lives and personalities.

But despite the present alienation between some of those gay men who choose to adopt effeminacy as a symbol of liberation and those who reject such behavior and dress as symbols of powerlessness, there is every reason to hope that this alienation will pass away. Already with the increasing number of leather bars, bike clubs, etc., there is a growing mood of respect and acceptance among the general gay male community and a lessened feeling of isolation and hostility within the leather scene as the scene grows and takes in more men who have not suffered from the old sense of rejection and isolation and who identify more closely with the gay community as a whole.

And when each group learns to express itself in harmony with the rest, this will create a basis for all-embracing social change.

So we fervently hope and, as Christians ministering to a divided and very new community, we must be deeply involved in ending this alienation. MCC must be a place in which all segments of the gay community, most emphatically *including* the men of the leather scene, can find a place of refuge and support and empowerment. If we close our doors to any group, no matter how odd their symbols may be to us, then we reject our Christ and become oppressors ourselves.

Response by Roy Birchard: Rick Weatherly's look at the L/L scene arises from a serious and persistent exploration of that scene over a period of several years. Some of his points about the scene, however, raise further questions.

For one thing, the social groups that gay males involve themselves in bear quite a few similarities once you get beneath the surface. The whole drag and royal court phenomenon, after all, presents an acting-out using symbols of another sort of power than what the L/L scene involves. (Emperors, queens and movie stars, after all, are figures of power and prestige.)

Yet neither the drag clubs nor the royal courts give S&M the place it holds in the L/L scene. Why? Can sadomasochism be so easily dismissed when discussing the L/L scene? How large a role does it play in the lives of the people who are into it, and what does it mean for them?

I am by no means hostile to S&M and find some of its role-reversal and penitential acting-out potentially helpful. Maybe it has sprung up as a secular replacement for the abandoned rigors of the Christian Church's penitential system. One of the major ongoing pastoral tasks of the Church always has been dealing with the human guilt, repentance and regeneration cycle.

There seems to be a real avoidance of discussing S&M in the Fellowship, although in my travels around I have met quite a few persons who are, or have been, into S&M. The association of S&M with the L/L scene is more than coincidental, I think. There seems to be no equivalent connection with the other subsections of the gay world.

Another point is that Weatherly says that for some men, the leather bar has been the first gay establishment of any kind they have frequented, and he says that many men he has talked to were repelled years ago by the effeminacy they found as the standard behavior of the old-time gay bar. But people are complicated, and they react to their total situation as it evolves. Maybe they say they were repelled by the nelliness of yore, but in those days there was, additionally, an absence of all our present-day social alternatives; in their place were severe social and legal penalties, anonymity, ignorance and fear about the whole business of being gay both by gay and non-gay people... and a few downtown bars. The whole situation has changed, Was the nelliness really the key?

Yet I do think the L/L scene that has grown up in the last few years provides some "liberation space," particularly for older men who feel out-of-place in some of the gay liberation organizations dominated by people in their twenties and thirties. A forty-five-year-old executive may not be psychologically prepared to attend an outdoor rally for gay rights or join a gay political club, but he may gain a great deal of personal satisfaction from belonging to a cycle club made up of men his own age with similar interests. And on the weekend, or at the cycle run, he can strut in his club's colors and display the symbols of his masculine, gay identity. Compared to the lonely homosexual of the 1950s, staring at the walls of his apartment or cruising outdoor areas for anonymous public sex, this gay man has made progress.

Still, some leather men have complained to me about how "jaded" or bored they are with the scene. While you can strut your colors down at the bar on the weekend, it's strictly a dark-of-night manhood. For every bike club member who showed up at Lafayette Park for the rally last August there must have been two or three who did not. I guess I feel that while these men are in a better space than formerly, the walls have been on slightly expended. But maybe the liberation party expects too much.

The problem I have with Weatherly's overall thesis is that I doubt one can neatly equate powerlessness and effeminacy. Certainly one cannot equate powerlessness with femininity. The drag queen in full, regal splendour and the leather macho dripping chains array themselves in polarly-opposite sets of symbols to achieve more or less the same effect: the stunning visual display of power and beauty. A physically slight, balding male can, through the artful application of feminine symbols, become a killer lady; while a Congressional aide, through a similar exercise, can present himself to admiring eyes as the modern equivalent of a pirate. Both have made themselves into something other than what they are in everyday life through a fantastic transformation, but are the two transformation processes so different?

In my own experience, I am more impressed by the pendulum swings in our public behavior. Before the pre-liberated average American gay male accepts his homosexuality, he may act out a determinedly-masculine public

demeanor, even if at considerable psychic cost. When, in due course, he moves into the gay scene, he may indulge himself in splurges of effeminism. The quiet, buttoned-down middle class boy becomes loud and nelly. But after a few years of this, psychic forces begin to balance the scale. Neither the repressed, buttoned-down personality, nor the shrieking disco dancer role adds up to the sum total of anybody's personality. People progress on to a sort of working androgyny: we are both butch and femme, and if a male, our lifelong maleness may carry more psychic weight than our being a gay male. Eventually, the pendulum draws us somewhere nearer the center.

And part of this, I think, is just aging and the concomitant integration and stabilization of personality which aging brings. Gay male discos attract a younger crowd and reward fresh-from-the-closet femininity. The leather bar draws a somewhat-older group, less conscious maybe of immaculate physical attractiveness.

Yet every time I generalize on the subject of the L/L scene, I am painfully aware of how many examples from my own experience contradict the generalizations I am trying to make. Sexual identity is more a rain forest than a neat village, and every human being is capable of containing within him/herself hundreds of apparent contradictions.

One final curiosity may show what I mean. When I first came out several years ago, I noticed that at 5' 11", when I was in most gay bars, I was more or less a tall person; in leather bars, I was average height. Part of the reason for someone's identifying with an L/L social

scene rather than a disco may be that a hulking two hundred pounder makes a poor disco dancer. The L/L scene rewards the lumbering male hunk and equips him with symbols and a setting that embellishes his bulk.

Beyond that, society treats tall people differently than short people. The United States Senate is full of tall men. Most U.S. Presidents have been physically tall men. (Mayor Abraham Beame of New York may be the short public official who proves the rule.) Men who are tall and muscular are presumed to be more "masculine" and "powerful" than the small and slight, at least as far as traditional public leadership roles go, and the leather scene may reward this symbol assignment within the gay setting.

On the other hand, what do you make of 5' 8" sadists, several of whom I am acquainted with? Or is the short sadist's role the compensation short people make for living during working hours in a world of giants? One conundrum leads to another. The mind seeking to make neat sense of all this is humbled.

Response by Weatherly: The aspect of your work with which I have the greatest reservation is your discussion of S&M on a level which I believe the public at large, in its present state of edification, is unable to follow. Though I would be opposed to a consideration of S&M in another set of articles, I believe you begin with the discussion of S&M on a level which might be understood by many who are familiar with it, but I believe the general public needs some more material of a basic educational nature before that happens. I might add that those committed to S&M are very hesitant about such public discussions and are opposed to neophytes (you and I) speaking out on topics which the "old hands" have the only "proper competence" to speak.

Furthermore, there really is, I'm now convinced, a genuine "non-relatedness" between S&M and the leather scene, and I am not sure that S&M is really germane to the discussion.

I think a major divergence between the two of us is our level of commitment to the leather scene. I have invested a great deal of myself into the scene and eager to defend and strengthen it. I sense in you a greater desire, well, to deprecate it.

For instance, while granting the surface similarities between drag and





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026 with funding from
CLIR DHC Grant 2026-2028

<https://archive.org/details/2174.07.39>

leather, it is a traditional put-down of leather to equate the two as you have done. Are you working through some sort of hostility to leather? People on the verge of a major commitment to the scene often act similarly.

I object strenuously to your attempt to equate effeminacy with femininity, thus opening up the whole feminism/androgyny can of worms. The adoption *by males* of feminine behavior is the item under discussion, not femininity or lack of it among women.

You seem to suggest, though it's never clearly stated, that male entrants to the gay community adopt effeminacy as an act of freedom and glory, for a short period of time, in that freedom. This assertion really does beg the question. The "freedom" that many of our new nelly brothers find in effeminacy is freedom from self respect, responsibility, competence, and (considering nelly viciousness) freedom from kindness and humanitarianism. Not that this is the case in most people, but for many I believe it is.

The reason you may find many gainfully-employed people, people in professions of power and influence, in the leather scene is that the fluff bar scene is composed of your typical file clerk, hairdresser, dog groomer, etc., a set of people who flee power and influence and adopt subsidiary, servant professions and who adopt effeminacy as the sign of their weakness and subservience ("Just us girls here, Mary!").

Wouldn't your average self-respecting male in an influential profession grow eventually alienated from the fluff crowd and seek to identify with a group more like himself?

There is nothing unhealthy when a person who finds wholeness in subservience is subservient. (What kind of M would I be!) But it *is* unhealthy and oppressive for a person to do the gay = inferior = 'me inferior equation and adopt subservience. There's no wholeness in that.

I would question also your assertion of a butch to nelly to butch/nelly dialectic. I've seen far too many people going through a thirty-year-long "splurge" of effeminacy with no end in sight.

There is a fable that I think applies quite well to our two very different

views of the leather scene. While most of us have heard it, its origin and context are not often realized (it comes from Buddhist scripture). The fable concerns several blind men and an elephant. Taken to the elephant and asked to describe the beast, they proceed to examine our trunked friend. One, grabbing ahold of a leg, exclaims, "An elephant is like a tree!" Another, grabbing the tail, counters, "No, it is like a rope." Still another, having encountered the trunk, complains, "You're both wrong! An elephant is like a large snake."

In an attempt to examine a hitherto-unexamined area, there is always this original blindness to the whole and many mistaken assumptions due to personal (therefore: subjective) experience.

Birchard and I joined this effort in beginning an examination of the leather scene not because either of us considered ourselves "experts." Rather, we did it to encourage those who know more than we to begin to speak. But after that original agreement of motives, our ways parted. "The Leather Scene as Liberation" was my effort to explain but a single aspect of the leather scene and the desire of some gay men to reject personal effeminacy in dress and behavior and to act and dress in a traditionally masculine manner. I am, as it were, trying to present an examination only of the elephant's tail, realizing well that there is a whole animal attached. Birchard (to drag the analogy even further) seems to dash madly about the beast grabbing first an ear, then a leg, now its tail and presenting us with neither the whole animal nor a clear

view of one part.

Such, however, is life. Who knows which way will give us our first comprehensive view of the subject in question?

Birchard responds: In 1864, the British Association planned a debate at Bath between the African explorers Richard Burton and John Speke about the probably location of the source of the Nile. David Livingstone, another 19th century explorer, was at home in Scotland and planned to attend. The day before the debate, John Speke was killed in a hunting accident. This tragedy increased rather than diminished public speculation about the Nile's source. As a result, the Royal Geographical Society and the British Foreign Office sponsored Livingstone in an expedition to solve the riddle of the central African lakes once and for all.

If we spur on some Livingstone of the leather psyche, we will have done enough. So much for elephants!

Weatherly's treatment of the leather scene is truncated by his avoidance of the subject of S&M, though useful as far as he goes. But the leather milieu is permeated with the S&M scene; it is always there.

The thesis Weatherly promotes of gay males embracing symbols of power do not explain S&M relationships, why or how people have sex or explore relationships. They put on leather jackets and go out seeking interrelationships, sex, or companionship.

There is an interrelationship of dominance and submission. No sexual relation takes place on a basis of equality. Individuals may reverse roles from occasion to occasion, and masters may share slaves, but two masters don't get together and both be masters—somebody has to be dominant.

The question of S&M does not have to do with the giving and receiving of pain. It has, rather, to do with pride. Like the martial arts, there is the pride in doing a job well. The artful demonstration of physical stamina, emotional strength and fortitude—these are what counts for the S. The m finds his pride in serving well. So the satisfaction comes from performing service well or demanding well. Attached to this are emotional overtones of caring and responsibility. Among those carrying the submissive role, there is a family-type relationship of mutual responsibilities and caring of one for another.



